

(The Clipper thanks Ethel Heffernan who loaned us this account of early life at the Gurnet. She and her family live in the house which was formerly the inn. --Ed).

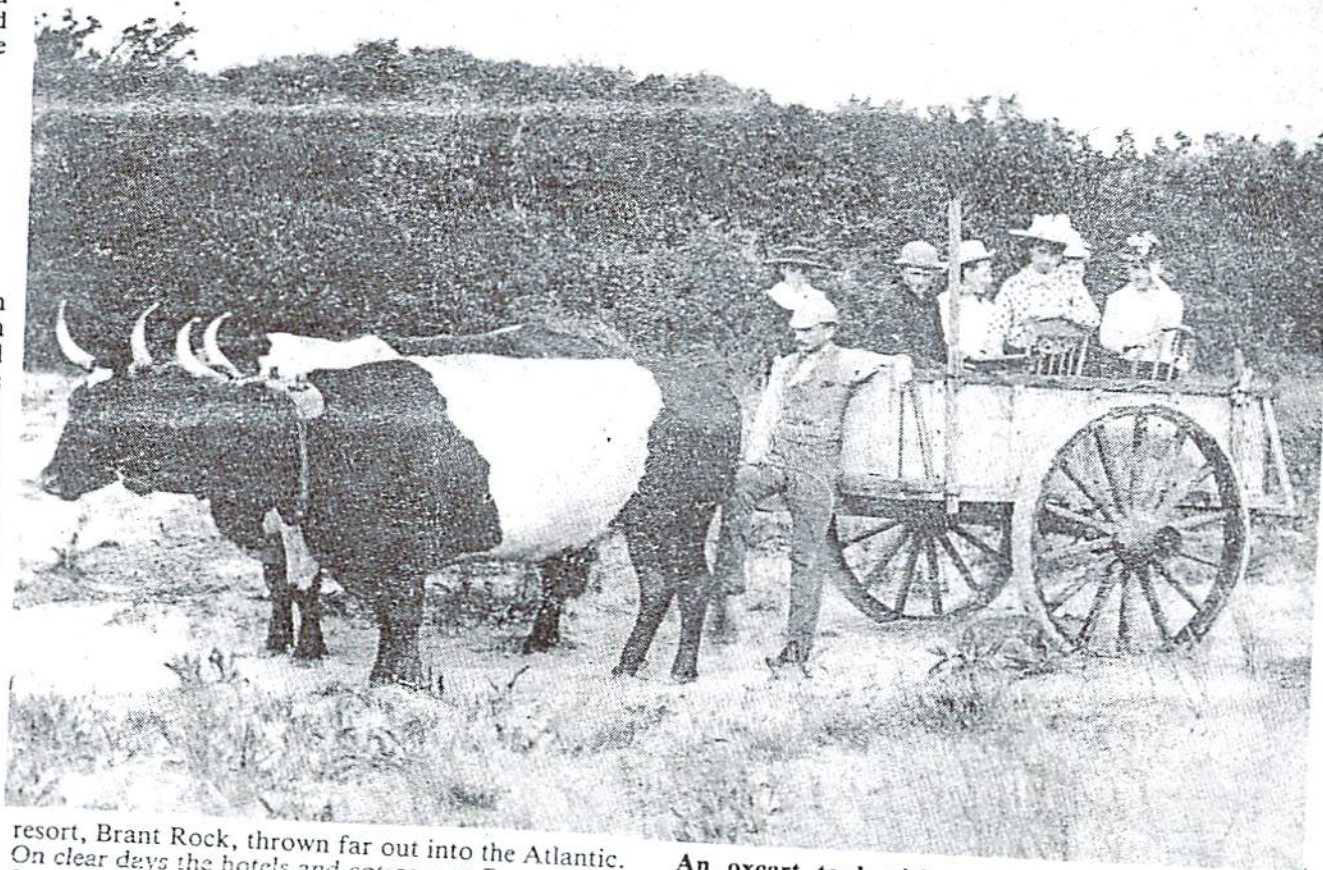
The Gurnet - Part I

By HERBERT BOARDMAN

(Written in 1935)

Memorial Day, 1935! Fifty years ago today on Memorial Day 1885, my grandfather, the late Joseph Boardman, opened his summer home (acquired earlier the same year) at Gurnet Point, Plymouth, as a summer boarding house. He maintained this establishment for 2 decades and as the author spent his boyhood vacations in this romantic spot it became a vital feature of his background. He is, for this reason, on the 50th anniversary of the Boardman family at Gurnet Point, commencing an historical sketch of the Gurnet, dwelling largely on the past 50 years of Boardman regime at the old Gurnet Inn, now known as the farmhouse.

"With the waves breaking on its rocky shore the Gurnet headland rises from the sea." So wrote Messenger Fisher, the Duxbury artist after his sojourn at Gurnet Point in 1906. The Gurnet headland stands at the extreme end of Duxbury Beach commanding the entrance of the harbor of historic Plymouth, landing place of the Pilgrims. It is today an imposing promontory about 50' high, jutting out into the blue waters of Cape Cod Bay and retaining much of its original wildness and charm. A single white lighthouse with a revolving light stands at the apex of the point, surrounded by the embankments of the ancient fort. Government land extends back to the middle of the peninsula; next is a large area built up by summer homes and beyond that stands the old Gurnet farmhouse, with its farming area and gardens gathered around the site of the former barn. A few cottages line the ocean front, with a large tract of land belonging to the Boardman family in close proximity. On the Plymouth Bay side the U.S. Coast Guard Station towers on the embankment with the village comprised of numerous summer cottages surrounding it. Away to the north and east extend many acres of marshland and the seemingly interminable line of Duxbury Beach with its white sand dunes and green plum bushes stretching away to the distant hills of Marshfield and Duxbury, finding extremity in the shores of Green Harbor with the long arm of the noted summer



resort, Brant Rock, thrown far out into the Atlantic. On clear days the hotels and cottages at Brant Rock, 8 miles away, are plainly visible. To the eastward lies the open ocean with the land at Provincetown, 18 miles out to sea visible only in an occasional mirage.

Across the bay to the southward lies Hither Manomet, as the Pilgrim novels of Jane Austin call it, a long arm of land similar to that of Brant Rock on the north. Its pine-clad hilltop is the highest point of land rising directly from the coast, south of Maine. The view of Manomet from the end of Gurnet Point is very grand and imposing. Plymouth Bay on the west extends to the long shore line of the town itself, of which The Gurnet is a political part. The beautiful white floor of Saquish Beach forms the northern wall of the Bay, culminating in Saquish Point, a walk of 2 miles from the Gurnet. Ancient maps define Saquish as an island. Away to the northwest lies sacred Clark's Island, where the Pilgrims first held divine service in the new world. The shimmering waters of Duxbury Bay and the mainland

An oxcart took visitors from the Green Harbor Railroad Station to the Gurnet along the beach. Later when the Powder Point Bridge was completed, they took the train to Duxbury and drove across the bridge.

dominated by the stately Myles Standish Monument form the background.

In early times the Gurnet, now practically treeless and windswept, was heavily wooded with a thick growth of pitch pine which after it was cleared away was impossible to replace. Only one tree has stood on the point in recent years, a Balm of Gilead or Gate of Heaven tree. Trees have been planted and flourished for a time but few have survived owing to the high winds.

The history of the Gurnet begins at the period when the Norsemen or Vikings visited our shores.

According to traditions handed down from the old North Sagas, the Viking Thorwald, son of Eric the Red, was slain by the Indians and buried on this point in 1004 A.D. The keel of Thorwald's ship was broken on Cape Cod, which he named "Kjalarness." After repairs had been made he sailed into a large bay within the cape and landed on "a hilly promontory overgrown with wood." "Here," he said, "it is beautiful, and here I should like to fix my abode." He and his followers later encountered a large number of Indians and a fierce battle ensued. Thorwald was mortally wounded and as he was dying, requested that he be buried on this promontory with 2 crosses planted, one at his feet and one at his head. His request was complied with and the place named "Krossaness." So spake the Icelandic sagas! Some authorities believe Krossaness to be Point Allerton at the entrance of Boston Harbor, others believe it to be Nahant, but the majority believe that it is Gurnet Point.

After this episode, the Gurnet disappeared from the annals of history. The pine-clad peninsula lay in lonely obscurity, the winds and storms of centuries sweeping over it. Champlain and John Smith visited these shores in 1607 and 1614. Champlain described it in 1613 as 'almost an island, covered with trees, principally pine' and Captain John Smith marked the site of Plymouth on his map. The landing of the Pilgrims marks the beginning of the Gurnet's real history.

On Dec. 16, 1620 an exploring party of men set forth in a small shallop from the MAYFLOWER ANCHORED IN Provincetown Harbor. They cruised along the inner shores of the Cape and on Dec. 18 had their first encounter with the Indians at present Eastham. They continued around the bay shore of Cape Cod until a violent storm overtook them, with snow, rain and a high wind. As they neared Manomet Point the hinge of the rudder broke and they were obliged to steer with oars. Master Coppin, the pilot, bade them to be of good cheer as he could see a harbor. As they steered across the bay and neared the Gurnet under press of sail, the mast suddenly broke in 3 places and the flood-tide bore them past the nose of the Gurnet into Saquish Cove. Master Coppin threw up his hands in despair and cried, "The Lord be merciful to us, I never saw this place before!" He wanted to run the shallop aground on Saquish Beach, but the seaman who steered bade those rowing to turn about as the cove filled with breakers would mean their destruction if they undertook to beach the shallop. It was late on Saturday, Dec. 19, when this happened. The short winter day had faded into the twilight and before dark the stricken shallop managed to make her way to Clark's Island where they went ashore. The next day, Sun-

Duxbury Clipper

Section 2

Thursday, May 21, 1981

day, Dec. 20, they spent on Clark's Island where they offered up prayer and praise to God, the first religious service held by Christians on the soil of New England. A large rock or boulder, Pulpit Rock, on this island marks the spot bearing the inscription, "On the Sabbath Day Wee Rested," from Gov. Bradford's journal.

On the following day, Monday, they started in the repaired shallop to explore the mainland and finally landed on Plymouth Rock and decided to settle there. This was the official historic landing of the Pilgrims, Dec. 21, 1620, but it must be remembered only the small group of explorers made this momentous landing as the rest were awaiting their return on board the anchored Mayflower at Provincetown.

The explorers hastened back to the ship after deciding to locate in Plymouth, and on Saturday, Dec. 26, 1620, the gallant ship Mayflower majestically sailed forth into Plymouth Harbor past the end of the Gurnet. What a sight for this deserted headland to witness and how imposing the headland must have looked to the weary Pilgrims, nearing the end of the hard voyage! Whether or not there was an Indian or 2 lurking in the Gurnet pines is not known. She slid quietly into the harbor close by the shores of Brown's Bank then a substantial island (though now it is a treacherous sand bar visible only at low water), rounded Beach Point, and finally anchored about opposite the site of the famous rock.

The Pilgrim heroes immediately began further exploration of the lonely shores and forest wilderness during the ensuing week and on their Christmas Day which would be Jan. 4, 1621, according to our calendar, they began to build the town of Plymouth by erecting the first or common house at the foot of the hill (present Leyden St.). The laying out and building proceeded apace and the Pilgrims were moved ashore as fast as houses were available until the entire company had been landed late in March.

On April 15, 1621 came the sad day when the good ship Mayflower weighed anchor and started on the return journey to England leaving the depleted band of Pilgrims in their little town on the wild and desolate shores of the new world. In his poem "The Courtship of Myles Standish," Henry Wadsworth Longfellow immortalizes the Gurnet as he describes the scene presented by the deserted Pilgrims gathered on the bluff to watch the departing ship. "Rounded the point of the Gurnet and leaving far to the southward Island and cape of sand, and the field of the first encounter, Took the wind on her quarter, and stood for the open Atlantic, Borne on the send of the sea, and the swelling hearts of the Pilgrims."

The colony gradually developed and the solitary rock on the shore became the cornerstone of the nation. Whether or not the Pilgrims visited the Gurnet is not known. It is quite possible that exploring parties landed there from time to time and that the abundance of clams which give Saquish its name proved a boon to them. However, they did name the place "Gurnet." The name first appears in Winslow's Relation, printed in England in 1622 and it is

THE GURNET

From page 21

supposed to mean a sort of fish having the same shape as the peninsula. It is also claimed that a promontory in Plymouth, England where the Pilgrims had sojourned before their voyage, gave our promontory its name.

The early settlers called it "The Gurnet Nose" and the long strand connecting it to the mainland they called "Salt Horse Beach." It became legally a part of Plymouth Jan. 7, 1638. In 1694 it was sold to John Doten, John Nelson and Samuel Lucas. Although Plymouth grew and spread, the Gurnet, save for an occasional exploring party in the shallop under Myles Standish, again lapsed into an extended period of historic obscurity, from which it did not awaken until well into the 18th century, when the first settlers came and began to cut away the pine forest.

Samuel Adams Drake in his book on the "New England Coast" states that one family owned a farm there for many generations. This family was undoubtedly the Burgess family, who appear to have been the earliest settlers on both the Gurnet and Saquish where the homesteads they built were still standing until well into the 20th century. It is thought that the lighthouses were established about 1710 and the farmhouse was built of native timber by the Burgess family about 1720. The original house was much smaller than at present. Some authorities claim the house was built in 1752.

The first lighthouses to be established and built by the Province were erected in 1768 and the first lighthouse keeper, officially speaking, was Thomas Burgess. The lighthouse keepers for over a century include Thomas Burgess, Joseph Burgess, Thomas Treble, William Sears, Milton Reamy, Edward Gorham, Henry Pingree and Alfred Eisner.

In 1776, during the Revolutionary War, a fort was built by the surrounding towns having 6 guns from 6-12 lbs. calibre, and a garrison of 60 men maintained until the close of the war. The lighthouses were burned in 1801 and rebuilt in 1803.



At right is the original Life Saving Station at the Gurnet. Life saving stations were the forerunners of Coast Guard Stations. Impossible to see in this pic-

ture is a house on Brown's Bank, across the bay, which was originally a small island. It is now covered with water and boats must be wary of it.